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“And He Appeared”

In receiving the blessing of Vayera, we are both the one who banishes the stranger, and the stranger herself. In finding the compassion to welcome the guest, to open our heart to the one who is different, the best tool we have is our memory of being the stranger ourselves. - Rabbi Shefa Gold “Torah Journeys”

Cora wrapped the spear in a long, coarse cloth- it would not do to be seen carrying steel, let alone such a weapon. Even though people’s imaginations had gone to sleep and they had long ago lost the ability to make decisions on their own, this serene, passive society could be roused- would rise up and stop rule-breakers. One of the main rules in this place was that steel was not welcome here: steel would shatter the peace.

Cora had become a mindless follower of the rules, herself; as the herbalist, she had enough freedom, enough room for expression of her individual life, that the confines of this place were soft and did not chafe her. It was like being held prisoner in silk, she thought ruefully. One gradually became more quiet; the rhythms of life were gentle, and time ceased to have any meaning.

Now that Jac’s coming had slapped Cora awake, she wondered who had made the “rules” in the first place. She wondered at the gentle pressure to give in - there was an unceasing, quiet force that all citizens put upon each other to live in the same rhythm, let go of imagining, striving, wondering-and with giving in, with letting go of the need to assert one’s individuality, came escape from pain. It was true: she remembered the days when she had first come here, she had been wild-eyed and frantic, clawing at everything, trying to find a way back to her life. She had been gravely injured, so they told her that her isolation in the cottage on the outskirts of town was “for her healing.” She soon learned that all newcomers were so isolated: kept apart so that

they could not infect the others with their longing for the lives they had left behind, or the visions they had seen as they made the crossing; the visions caused endless questions, and the citizens of the Lost Kingdom found questions uncomfortable. Such things as ambition, imagination, desire, longing, goals--these things all were a part of living in a world that had the element of Time; these things belonged to a linear world, and had to be let go in the Lost Kingdom. They were highly “contagious”- if one person started telling a story or a memory from their old life, if a single person started using their imagination, the others would be infected with longing, or dreams, or desire for change. There would be restlessness, unhappiness with their lot, and the feeling of being trapped would become unbearable. Subtly, they were all taught that the old way of life was simply not possible here...that all must learn to breathe, to rest, to be at peace and work together as one entity. People were no longer allowed to use individual names- names were a way of making boundaries between ourselves and others, they were a way of asserting our own identities, which led, again, inevitably, to: desire, ambition, dreaming, striving...

Cora sighed, feeling suddenly weary, the wrapped spear heavy in her arms. She did not know why this place existed, or what it was they were all supposed to achieve or learn here. One corner of her mouth lifted in a surprised smile: that was the old way of thinking, “achieve” and “learn”...it was not easy to let that go. How quickly all the old words and concepts came flooding back, as soon as she had laid eyes on Jac’s bright, intense face. She grasped the spear with renewed purpose: if the one who was to bring Time here and shatter this place really had arrived, Cora had to help her at all costs.

She had a favorite place down by the river, not far from the “healing” cottages where people were taken to be isolated and detoxified. She went there now, carrying the wrapped spear

and a basket. She had often quietly observed Zimri as he took over this place- he was able to shape reality with his mind, somehow. He had made it known that only his kind were able to do so; only Manuscripts could effect change here. With his mind and his will, he had subtly shaped the very fabric of reality in the Kingdom. Cora had accepted his explanation that only Manuscripts could do this here, whereas in her old world, Manuscripts had no power and were forced to change to reflect and express the new reality that her people's actions created. Whether intended or not, the smallest action there created change all the time. She shook her head in wonder, thinking how safe she had felt in that strange, constantly shifting world; she had been used to it, and had not questioned it. Looking at it from her vantage point now, it seemed volatile, dangerous, unstable, uncertain, and deeply exciting. Should she ever win her way back to her old kingdom, she would choose her words and actions with great care and use her power- the power that all living beings have to affect the world around them- wisely.

She had not checked on Zimri for some time; after she had put him "to sleep", she had laid him in her bunk and covered him up, only checking to see that he was still breathing. He was very pale and bleached, but seemed to be in a deep sleep only. Beneath his eyelids, his eyes moved restlessly. He did not need to eat or void himself; as a Manuscript, he had a different sort of "life" which consisted mainly of words and ideas. He breathed, but she supposed that was his way of taking in the world around him. Take it in, reflect it, let it out. Here in the Lost Kingdom he had begun to generate his own ideas and assert himself in the world in a somewhat alarming fashion; he was forceful, fiery- even angry.

Observing the way he worked to effect change, she had come to the conclusion that she was not at all sure his was the only kind who could do it. She determined now to go down to her private place at the river and try on her own to mold reality.

She climbed down the bank, to the place where the bright green mossy grass grew patchy, then disappeared altogether. The bank was muddy, the river swift. The earth was cold and squelched under her boots. She inhaled the warm, sweetish smell of earthworm, the slightly tangy smell of grass and growing things; spring was coming. She put her hand on her favorite willow, an old, stately tree that grew over the river. She could imagine the life pulsing under that bark- she had long thought of this tree as her companion, and had sat often with her back against its firm side. She sat in her old position now, leaning her back against the tree, her legs crossed, her robe hiked up and pooled comfortably in her lap. The tree was constant, steady, and proof in her eyes that it was not what one achieved in life that made one loved, worthwhile and beautiful; the comfort she felt in the presence of this exquisite tree was enough to show her that merely to be, and be true to one's nature, was enough.

Cora set the spear across her lap, turned her hands palm upward, still clasping the cloth-wrapped bundle lightly. She closed her eyes and began to breathe deeply, as she had seen Zimri do. He had not told her how to do the rest- how to actually shape reality- so she simply made up the rest on her own. She imagined a tunnel that had lain concealed in the bank, above the tree, far enough away that it did not impede the roots. The entrance to the tunnel was braced with wood; she pictured in great detail how the earth had been cut to form the entrance, the grass and mud lifting up like a piece of fabric, then laid on top of the wood bracing the mouth of the tunnel, the cleverly hinged lid. She pictured every inch of the tunnel, and knew with her mind

that of course it had been there a long, long time. Wide and tall enough to walk with only a slight stoop; candles in the entrance, with matches in damp-proof boxes; shelves of provisions, should someone need to use this place for refuge. When she felt a warming and lightening in her chest and mind that told her, somehow, that of course the tunnel was there, it had been there a long time, when she began to feel strangely silly for breathing deeply and focusing on that tunnel of all things, it had been there since she could remember, Cora opened her eyes.

The day had grown achingly bright, the sky eye-wateringly clear, the river impossibly blue. The air was crisp and deliciously cool on her cheeks, in her nose and mouth. She smiled, and, bracing a hand on the tree for help, unbent her knees (the slight ache and cracking noise a wry reminder of her age), held the wrapped spear tighter, and walked up the bank to find her tunnel. It was there, just as she had known it would be. Zimri was wrong; the Manuscripts were not the only beings who could do this. Whatever this world was, it could be shaped by faith and knowing. She paused as the full impact of that realization hit her in the chest, knocking her breathless. Perhaps there were limits to this ability; Cora hoped so. Even so, she tingled with excitement-the chaos and the wonder they could create here! She shook her head. It would not do, to let everyone know of this. She knew, without knowing why she knew, that she must help the stranger who had come to bring Time to this place. They were poised on the edge of great danger, and none of the gentle people going placidly about their lives had any awareness of that which threatened to overwhelm them.

The tunnel was exactly as Cora had imagined it, smooth and well-made. Her candlelight danced on the lumpy, hard-packed sides as she followed it, her heart pounding. She reached the wooden ladder and knew she was at the end. She said a small prayer for courage, watching the

light from her candle dancing wildly as her trembling hand set it in the glass and copper lantern-shaped holder set in the wall; she climbed up the few steps of the ladder, and, holding the top, pressed her shoulder against the wooden circular trap door above her.

The floor lifted with a creak and a bang; she climbed up into the warm “healing” cottage, and let the trapdoor fall back down. It was cleverly concealed with a braided rug in rust and red. She looked around- there were tables with breakfast things for two, the blankets of both beds were mussed, one of the sets of blankets pulled off one side of the bed trailed along the yellowish wood floor...dust motes danced in the beams of sun streaming into the window, illuminating a completely empty room. Cora set the butt of the spear on the floor, and leaned her forehead against the rough cloth wrapping. She was too late. They were gone.